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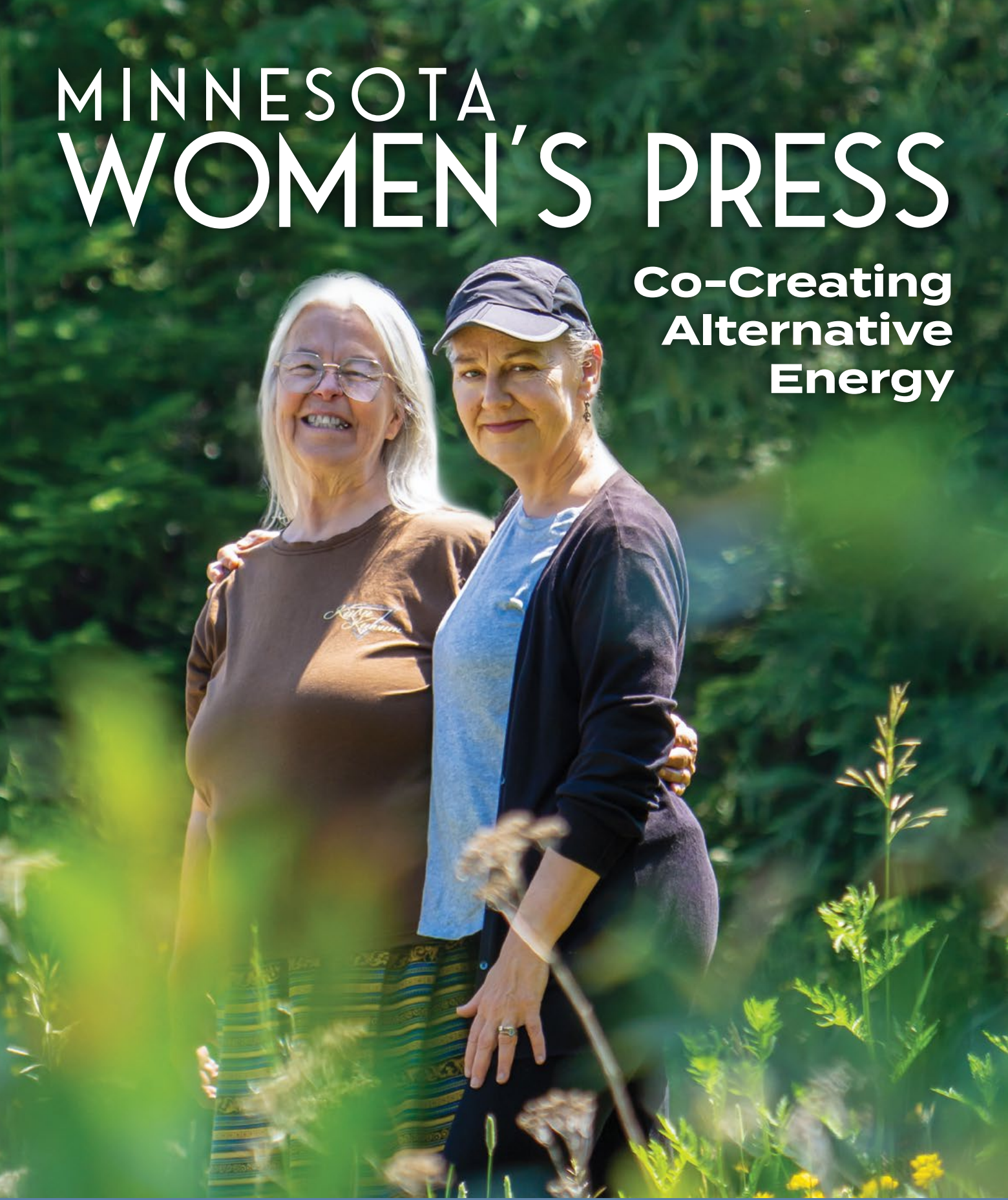

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Minnesota Women's Press has been sharing the stories of women since 1985, as the longest continuously run feminist print publications in the country. It is freely available at more than 300 locations.

Our mission: Authentic community-based journalism that amplifies and inspires the stories, action steps, and leadership of powerful, everyday women (cis and trans) and nonbinary people.

Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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Past Publishers:
Mollie Hoben & Glenda Martin (1985–2002)
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MWP TEAM

Publisher/Editor: Mikki Morrissette

Creative Director: Sarah Whiting

Sales & Development: Taylor Roberson, Eve Wandering

Financial Operations: Fariba Sanikhatam

Guest Editor: Priscilla Trinh

Community Engagement: Lisa Huftel, Siena Iwasaki Milbauer, Amber Lynum, Olivia Worcester

This month's writers: Rukia Abdi, Margaret Cherne-Hendrick, Tamara Dean, Becky Gawboy, Cally Hunt, Diane Meyer, Louise Miltich, Kathryn Milun, Sarah Mooradian, Carla Robinson, Lizzy Sirianni, Samantha Wolf

Proofreader: Abbie Phelps

Distribution: Sarah Whiting

Digital Development: Mikki Morrissette

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Minnesota Women's Press earned three photography and two writing awards from the Minnesota Newspaper Association for 2024.

Upcoming magazine topic: Collective Health and Books/Arts (September/October double issue)

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PHOTO SARAH WHITING

"A society that allows itself to admit and articulate its nonmaterial human needs, and to find nonmaterial ways to satisfy them, would require much lower material and energy throughputs and would provide much higher levels of human fulfillment."

— Donella Meadows

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Powering the Future

by Priscilla Trinh, guest editor

It is often said that money makes the world go around, but it's actually energy that powers society. Energy is power — not only in the physical sense, but socially and politically as well.

When I first learned the pervasive role of energy (especially oil) in globalized, capitalist societies, I was struck by the simplicity and horror of that fragility hiding in plain sight. It then seemed so obvious to me that consumption levels and reliance on a few resources left us in a precarious situation. All the wars fought to secure oil and control minerals seemed to make sense.

Finite resources — like oil, coal, and gas — enable us to have magical things: long-distance transportation across land, air, and sea; 24/7 heating and air-conditioning; plastic for medical and food applications; products for everything from our faces to our floors. However, this version of existence has only been afforded to some and is temporary.

Fossil fuels and precious metals will not simply run out. Drilling will become increasingly expensive as we dig deeper to extract lower-quality material. After costs outweigh profits, we will see restricted supply. There will be shortages and more conflict.

The good news: many companies and communities are responding with renewable energy investments and policy, and sustainable initiatives. The bad news: many are still unaware of our enormous daily usage of energy, beyond turning on lights and powering automobiles. Even those who are aware may believe that plug-and-play renewables are a great substitute while continuing consumerism as usual.

In order to withstand future energy bottlenecks, major cultural and economic shifts are required of us. Across Minnesota, various organizations and movements are advancing positive change:

- CURE MN, Great Plains Institute, and Fresh Energy are building coalitions across rural and urban regions to promote energy democracy.
- Solar Commons is blending stewardship with Indigenous food sovereignty to model effective community-owned solar power.
- Research is exploring less harmful industry standards.
- Grassroots efforts are rebuilding knowledge to revive practices that are less energy-intensive but more emotionally restorative.

I hope you'll be inspired by the efforts highlighted in this issue. If you want to work with Minnesota Women's Press on taking stories into statewide discussions, sign up here:

by Mikki Morrissette

With new White House cuts to federal tax credits for wind and solar energy, costs for the average consumer are expected to go up over the next decade, according to the nonpartisan think tank Energy Innovation. Many Minnesotans have been pushing for equitable systems that do not simply rely on consumers to bear the burden of increased energy costs.

Although we packed a lot into this issue, there was much more we could have shared if we were not impacted by increased shipping, paper, and ink costs. Some stories are online-only. Others are planned for a future special issue on ecofeminism that we want to create. Please support our efforts to go deep into challenges and solutions to pain points that Minnesotans are facing, in housing, caregiving, trauma, immigrant storytelling, and ecolution (our term for reviving local economies and ecosystems).

Become a Badass member, now with new tiers of support: womenspress.com/member

Correction: In July's edition, we misgendered Natalia Mendez. We should have used the pronouns they/their. We regret the error.

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Bringing Backyard Chickens to My Community

submitted by Samantha Wolf

My journey with backyard hens — both chickens and ducks — started with a simple but heartfelt desire: I wanted my family to reconnect with the food we eat and the land that sustains us. There's something deeply moving about watching a child gather a warm egg from a nest or care for a living animal. These small, quiet moments plant powerful seeds.

For me, those seeds were planted early. I grew up in a small town in north-central Wisconsin on a hobby farm. Many of my most vivid memories involve raising chickens and other animals. While most were pets, my sister and I started a small egg business with our parents' blessing. We sold surplus eggs, fed the hens, cleaned the coop, and even delivered eggs to our middle school teachers, who became loyal customers.

Now, as an adult and parent, I understand what my parents knew all along — raising chickens isn't just about eggs. It's about sustainability, responsibility, and staying grounded in where our food comes from. When I had kids of my own, that old pull returned. I started dreaming about keeping hens again, this time for them as much as for me.

That's when I learned something surprising: my current Minnesota hometown of Woodbury hadn't updated its ordinances to allow backyard flocks. This stood out to me, since I knew how many surrounding cities had already embraced them. While searching for others who shared my interest, I came across a private Facebook group, and met Rachel.

Rachel had been advocating for backyard hens with the Woodbury City Council since moving here three years ago. In her previous neighborhood in downtown Saint Paul, she raised six beloved pet hens that became favorites among neighbors, who were genuinely sad to see them — and her — go. She was determined to bring that same sense of connection and sustainability to Woodbury. We

joined forces and launched a Facebook group to organize, educate, and rally community support.

Our mission is simple: we want Woodbury to allow the responsible keeping of up to six backyard hens in standard residential zones, especially R-4, where most family homes are located. In October 2024, we celebrated a small but meaningful win when the city council approved hens in R-1 and R-2 rural districts. It was a great first step, but true progress means access for all residents.

PHOTO SKYE RYGH

Samantha Wolf and her children at her childhood home

We're advocating for a policy that reflects modern values of self-sufficiency, sustainability, and raising children with a sense of stewardship. Our vision is practical: clear, compassionate rules that support animal welfare and neighborhood harmony.

We're also working to address common misconceptions about backyard flocks. Some people worry about noise, but hens are quieter than normal conversation. Others are concerned about odor or cleanliness, not realizing how easy a small, well-kept flock is to manage. Change takes time, education, and trust, and we're committed to doing the work.

The benefits speak for themselves. Hens provide fresh, nutritious eggs. Ducks lay eggs that are a great option for those with allergies. Both eat food scraps and produce excellent fertilizer. And perhaps most importantly, they provide an opportunity to learn empathy, patience, and real-world responsibility for kids and families. They reconnect us to the natural systems we depend on.

Cities across Minnesota (see sidebar) already allow backyard hens, regardless of lot size. Cities that value education, wellness, and environmental stewardship can lead with family-friendly policies.

This movement isn't just about chickens or ducks. It's about taking care to understand where our food comes from and building sustainable communities, one backyard at a time. MMP

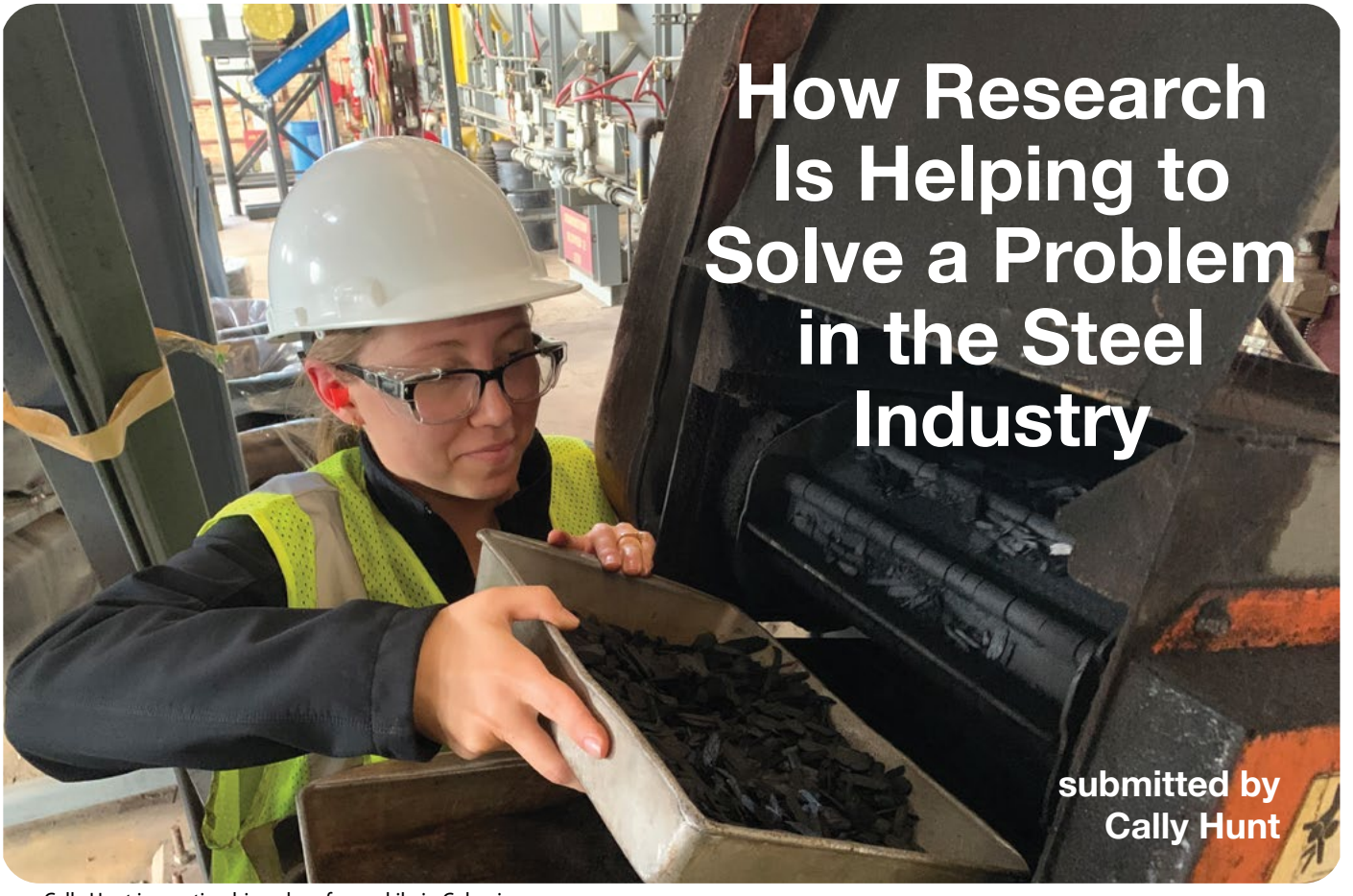
To learn more, join our Facebook group: Woodbury Backyard Chickens & Ducks.

Cities where backyard chickens are generally allowed with rules
most do not allow roosters

- Blaine: Allows up to six hens with a permit
- Bloomington: Allows up to four hens with a permit
- Centerville: Allows up to four hens with permits and neighbor input
- Duluth: Allows up to five hens with a permit
- Eagan: Allows up to five hens with a permit
- Farmington: Allows up to three hens in certain areas with zoning approval
- Golden Valley: Allows up to four hens with a license
- Hopkins: Allows backyard chickens with a license
- Lakeville: Allows up to three hens with a permit
- Maple Grove: Allows up to 25 hens depending on lot size
- Minneapolis: Allows up to six chickens with a permit
- Monticello: Allows up to six hens with a permit
- North Saint Paul: Allows up to six hens in a coop 15 feet from property lines
- Saint Cloud: Allows up to 10 hens; permits for more hens may be obtained.
- Saint Francis: Allows chickens on properties less than five acres with a permit; limits are based on acreage
- Saint Paul: Allows a certain number of hens depending on the permit type

Regulations are evolving, so consult your local government for updated information.

PHOTO JUNE BRENEMAN FOR UMN/NRRI



How Research Is Helping to Solve a Problem in the Steel Industry

submitted by Cally Hunt

Cally Hunt inspecting biocarbon from a kiln in Coleraine

Steel is a combination of iron and carbon, used for security and construction. The process of making steel generally requires pulverizing high-fossil coal to mix it with molten slag. This process is not ideal or fully effective, and contributes about 8 percent of global carbon emissions. Worldwide customers, regulators, and steel producers were looking for an alternative. A $4.5-million research project was funded by the University of Minnesota Natural Resources Research Institute (NRRI), industry assistance, and a $2.9-million federal grant from the U.S. Department of Energy.

The planet has produced underground fossil coal from high pressure and heat over millions of years. The question was, how could that kind of fuel be produced in a shorter time frame above ground, in a more precise process for making steel?

Twelve scientists on an NRRI materials and bioeconomy team are working with ten engineers and technicians on a minerals and metallurgy team, as well as members of the forest and lands research team.

Cally Hunt is a recent University of Minnesota Duluth graduate working on the research, "targeting readily available and underutilized biomass sources and subjecting them to high temperatures in the absence of oxygen [pyrolysis]. The pyrolyzed biomass is then densified to create an engineered biocarbon product that performs like and has the same properties as fossil coal used in the steelmaking process."

While most people do not understand what that might mean, the end result is intended to create a carbon-neutral alternative for the steel industry. Trees and other biomass — which absorb CO_2 — can be processed at the end of their life span into an engineered biocarbon for steelmaking.

As Hunt explains, "Currently, steel is produced primarily via two routes: blast furnaces [BF] and electric arc furnaces [EAF]. EAFs utilize recycled steel and have less CO_2 emissions compared to BF. EAFs are generally considered the more sustainable steel production method; 70 percent of North American steel is produced via EAFs. Other countries are also looking for fossil coal substitutes for steelmaking. To stay globally competitive in this industry, it is imperative that we invest in this research." MWP

Cally Hunt (she/her) started in the paper-making industry, and was excited to learn how to apply biomass sources into other uses. Background context was provided for this story by NRRI's June Breneman.

What's New at womenspress.com

story development designed for stronger conversations about statewide values, solutions, and action steps

Our new "Where do we go from here?" series takes stories about key statewide issues into discussions about solutions. Thus far our topics include:

- Caregiving needs
- Perspectives about guns
- Housing solutions
- Domestic violence
- Medicaid cuts
- Students Demand Action movement

From our housing series, solutions include finding short, cash-based day jobs for the unhoused, offering more supportive and communal housing options, and making it much easier for emerging developers to create affordable homes.

All of these topics have discussion guides that we can make available for conversations in your communities. Reach out to editor@womenspress.com to learn more.

We are writing a series about data centers. Following is an excerpt of a related story at womenspress.com.

What Minnesotans Should Know About Data Centers

reported by Diane Meyer

This year's bill HF16 — a budget deal finalized by Minnesota legislators on June 9 — is primarily focused on incentivizing the development of new hyperscale data centers in Minnesota. The bill includes uncapped sales tax breaks for technology companies and data center developers. Development is set to cost the state $137 million dollars in potential tax revenue for the 2027 budget year and $219 million in 2029, according to the Minnesota Department of Revenue.

Data centers are not new, but their exorbitant demands for energy are. Hyperscale data centers, 11 of which are currently proposed in Minnesota by companies including Meta, Amazon, and Tract, "are in every way unprecedented in their potential impacts," according to Peter Wagenius, legislative and political director for the North Star Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Wagenius admits that he has little faith in the government when it comes to the issue of energy and the environment. Environmental regulations that the Sierra Club and other organizations lobbied for were shut down by legislators — who were mainly interested in attracting business from developers. They promise to bring thousands of jobs, despite concerns that construction jobs will be temporary and the bulk of administration jobs will be remote. "It comes down to an issue of trust," Wagenius says.

The Sierra Club and other environmental advocacy groups have pointed out the disparity between the minimal environmental standards required of data centers by law and what they believe is actually needed from industry to succeed as stewards of the earth. Minnesota is still looking ahead to 2040, the year heralded as the 100 percent carbon-free energy deadline, but Wagenius is now worried that the state will not be able to meet this goal.

Not protected in legislation:

- Water conservation measures that would require closed-loop water cooling systems (an industrial and commercial standard in Minnesota);

continued on next page

Thanks to 2025 underwriters to date, who support Changemakers Alliance content development

Joan Gilles / Financial Planning Partners, Lenfest Institute for Journalism, Minneapolis Foundation, Our Lady of Peace, Press Forward Minnesota, Unidos, Valvoline in Northern Minnesota, as well as deep support from Kristin Siegesmund, Michelle and Bill Pohlad, and more than 250 Badass members

COURTESY PHOTO

- Regulations addressing noise and light pollution
- Assurances that massive backup generators will not require large amounts of diesel fuel
- Restrictions on nondisclosure agreements signed between data center developers and local governments
- Requirements to provide environmental impact statements

In the city of Farmington, community members received simple notices about the rezoning of a residential area in their city last year. They discovered that nondisclosure agreements had been signed by the city in partnership with Tract, a private out-of-state development company. Community members now are waging a legal battle against the city.

Cathy Johnson, who lives in Farmington, says she and her neighbors realized that only a small percentage of their community had been notified about the proposed "technology park" 250 feet from some of their property lines. They later learned that the rezoned land would become a data center campus. It would include 12 buildings and span 2.5 million square feet, requiring 708 megawatts of energy and 236 backup generators.

Copies of the rezoning notice started circulating as anxiety about the development increased. Johnson explains the formation of the Coalition for Responsible Data Centers, and her unexpected journey into activism: "We met in the park and we exchanged emails. We started meeting in my backyard as a coalition. Now we're a corporation and we're registered lobbyists."

Residents of Farmington raised concerns, attended public hearings, and pleaded with city council members to think about the anticipated environmental impacts on their domestic water supply and electrical grid. Yet Johnson and the coalition felt ignored by local government and suspect that other communities could face the same lack of transparency from data center developers. "This is a precedent-setting situation. We're not just fighting for Farmington," she says.

In nearby Rosemount, a hyperscale data center owned by Meta is already under construction; Tract is seeking to build a second data center in Rosemount. A development application has been filed in Cannon Falls. Other projects have been proposed in Becker and Chaska. "We can't be isolationist. This is much bigger than any one city."

The water conservation issue is one the coalition seeks to amplify. Johnson points to Georgia, where state policies prioritize hospitals and nursing homes when water reservoirs are at risk. Policy, however, has not yet factored in increased stress placed on water supplies by data centers.

The Coalition for Responsible Data Centers is trying to fund its ongoing legal battle against the city of Farmington. Johnson welcomes support. "We're just folks up against billionaires."

Find a longer story online. We also have a commentary from former Minnesota senator Patricia Torres Ray about this topic.

Minnesota Women's Press intends to co-host a listening session in the Farmington area August 20 to discuss this issue. Sign up to learn more:

Talking With Rukia Abdi, outreach and engagement, Community Energy Futures

Q: What does Cooperative Energy Futures (CEF) do?

The center of CEF's work is to give power back to the communities that are burdened with high energy bills and don't think they have options other than their usual energy provider. CEF is redefining how low-income communities use energy — not just as consumers but as renewable energy providers and co-op members. They have a say in

how the organization functions and who benefits from the energy system.

When I am in the community, I ask people what their relationship is with their current energy provider and what they would do to make it better. They often complain about how high their electricity cost has been. I tell them that CEF is a member organization that enables them to make their own clean energy and lower their energy bill. A lot of our focus is on low-income communities, because they face the greatest energy burden.

The biggest misconception I hear in the community is that people assume they have to be a homeowner to participate. That is not the case. CEF makes it possible for low-income community members who are renters, or live in low-income housing, to have access to clean and affordable energy.

Q: What are some of the wins and challenges in building energy democracy?

One of the challenges is the misconception about what solar or clean energy is and who can participate. Some are cautious because they are used to companies taking advantage of them.

Some of our wins lately have been in filling five community solar gardens. CEF works with local developers who hire and educate community members for our projects. We are building awareness of co-op ownership and values by collaborating with and amplifying the work of other cooperatives, including Paper Moon Childcare Cooperative and Minnesota Translator and Interpreter Cooperative, among others.

We have a presence at the state legislature by working closely with community organizers and organizations that share our values and mission. These include Minnesota Renewable Now, Phillips West Neighborhood Organization, Stevens Square Community Organization, Whittier Alliance, Ventura Village, and others.

COURTESY PHOTO

Q: Are there plans to scale this model around Minnesota?

At the moment, we are limited to communities only on Xcel territory, which is a very large area covering the Twin Cities, as well as some areas in rural Minnesota. We are developing community solar gardens across the state and are actively doing more rural and suburban outreach. CEF is also helping people in other states build a model. MWP

Sign up for the CEF newsletter, and join a wait list for community solar gardens. If you are an Xcel customer, learn about sustainable homes and affordable solar programs. People who are not able to participate in a solar projects can still be a member of the co-op.

cooperativeenergyfutures.com

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Transforming Our Reliance on Limited Fossil Fuels

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

written by Lizzy Sirianni

Like many children in the U.S, I grew up swimming in energy, unaware that this made me a privileged minority. When I learned about the challenges created by this consumption, my views were turned upside down.

Energy consumption has tended to come from food and biomass. The industrial revolution brought technological leaps and overflowing fossil fuels. The availability of these dense fuels increased over the following centuries, creating an economy dependent on growth.

But these ancient fossil fuels are finite, and once gone, they will never be available again. Even more pressing in the near term will be the loss of economically viable reserves. As extraction becomes more remote, complex, and expensive, rising costs will reduce accessibility for the average person.

Renewables and nuclear power can help, but they won't be able to overcome the fundamental reality of living on a finite planet among endless pressures to consume. In short, we will need to cope with declining energy availability as a culture. We will all be better off if we reduce the energy we use.

There Are Good Options

I was able to make sweeping changes in my life. I localized my diet, learned how to bike around my city, and reduced consumption across the board.

Of course, access to a car and fresh food is a privilege. It is those of us with choices who have the biggest footprint.

My biggest changes go beyond individual actions. One of the most insidious negative consequences of fossil fuels has been the erosion of social ties and reciprocity. Because we have such abundant energy, we've lost our sense of reliance on neighbors — retreating into short-term comforts and isolating conveniences at the cost of resilient support systems.

Growing deep roots has become my guiding principle. I've engaged with my city by learning about local policies, especially for transportation and housing. I live in Minneapolis, which has been building bike infrastructure, quickly becoming the best city in the country for cyclists. This might sound like a small impact, but biking is deeply connected to equity in housing, health, and finances.

There are so many groups working toward better

futures. Local agriculture is particularly special, such as Community Supported Agriculture, farmers markets, and teaching youth agricultural techniques to build a connection with the land. But this is only the beginning of what's possible.

One article that has been stuck in my brain talks about community canneries in the early 20th century. There was a time when canning was a necessity for eating locally year-round in the midwest. Doing this individually was an enormous task. Community canneries shared this labor and provided education to women.

Community canning centers were dissolved during the mid-20th century as industrial, processed canned goods became available in stores — typically produced under dubious working conditions. I wonder what areas designated as food deserts — often impacting low-income communities — might look like if community-based canning centers were still commonplace to help preserve locally grown fresh produce.

A lower energy future will look different in Minnesota than in other places around the world, and unrecognizable from how we live today. These transformations are most critical at the local level, as we fight for policies that serve people and the earth, even while our national politics are veering toward the opposite.

For me, the most important way to build community is also the most fun. Finding my people, sharing the joys of life, and creating deep connections has grounded me.

Navigating complex relationships can be uncomfortable. But humanity has only ever truly thrived within community — and it is the only way we'll have a shot at vibrant, flourishing futures. MWP

Lizzy Sirianni (she/her) is a senior producer and researcher for the Institute for the Study of Energy and Our Future.

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Energy as Commons: The Northland Solar Commons

PHOTO NE-DAH-NESS GREENE

submitted by Becky Gawboy and Kathryn Milun

Becky Gawboy (l) is executive director of Waawaate Programs, a nonprofit dedicated to Ojibwe education of traditional foodways. Kathryn Milun is a professor of anthropology and the founder and director of the University of Minnesota's Solar Commons Project.

In early summer of 2024, Dani Pieratos, a young Ojibwe mother and food sovereignty activist on the Bois Forte Reservation, sat with us at the dining room table of the Gawboy farm near Lake Vermillion. We knew Dani as the brilliant young girl who left the reservation at 18 with a scholarship to Stanford University and returned several years later with two beloved baby boys and a degree, with honors, in Native American Studies.

Dani introduced us: Becky Gawboy is executive director of Waawaate Programs, a nonprofit dedicated to Ojibwe education that reconnects community with ancestral knowledge of harvesting, preparing, and preserving food. Kathryn Milun is a professor of anthropology and the founder and director of the University of Minnesota's Solar Commons Project. This is a new type of community solar ownership that creates a long-term revenue stream to fund local wealth-building. Dani brought us together to carry out her 100-page plan to build food sovereignty in the Bois Forte Ojibwe community with funds co-created from Minnesota's first solar commons.

Since that time, we have worked together to realize Dani's plan to demonstrate the healing power and gift economy that are at the heart of both solar energy and traditional Anishinaabe foodways.

Dani passed away in June 2025 at the age of 36. We dedicate this essay to her enormous heart and her dedication to her ancestors and descendants in the Bois Forte Ojibwe community. Dani's integrative vision highlights what is generally missing in our conversation about energy transition in Minnesota and what our proposed strategy of energy commoning can do about that.

A Brief History of Energy

Energy — not money — is the basis of a community's wealth. Anthropologists have long studied how societies use, tap into, and balance the biophysical impacts of energy consumption.

In the wood-based economy that created wealth for most of human history, people tended to sustainably govern their forests as commons: a shareable, sacred source of energy in foraged food (for muscle energy) and wood (for heat and shelter).

In the modern petrodollar economy, fossil fuel extraction and global markets have scaled humans' energy use beyond stable biosphere boundaries. Today we need scientists to tell

us the impacts of our overuse, and technical experts to tell us how to rebalance our socio-ecological energy systems.

In a democracy, we need educated citizens to make these changes by voting for large-scale collective changes. And importantly, as our human ancestors have shown us, we need moral vision and social trust so we can work together, change how we see and value energy, and honor the interdependence of energy with our personal and planetary health.

It is the political and cultural needs of our energy transition that are proving to be the most difficult. In Minnesota, a state without any fossil fuel resources, the vast infrastructure systems of energy extraction and electricity generation remain basically invisible to civil society. Minnesotans might experience their energy as a kind of magic that happens when they flip an electric switch or squeeze a gas pump handle. This might cause us to believe that the investor-owned, monopolistic utilities and profiteers who dominated our electricity and petroleum sectors throughout the 20th century should also be trusted to lead our 21st-century transition to clean energy.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Dani Pieratos, photographed for an essay with the Minnesota Women's Press in 2021 about food sovereignty.

The first two decades of the 21st century show us how mistaken that notion is.

The powerful, dominant 20th-century energy paradigm needs to be challenged. If we do not take advantage of what the new renewable energy technologies offer — in terms of smaller-scale point-of-use locations and alternative ownership structures — Minnesota and the nation will miss a historic opportunity to take control of energy transition.

In order to bring the energy system into equitable and sustainable balance, Minnesotans need to experiment with alternative models of energy ownership. Solar commons' project focus is on solar energy. The solar arrays that capture the sun's free energy are now affordable. They do not require industrial-scale corporate ownership to generate electricity. And, importantly, solar panels can produce financial benefits for owners.

How does solar commons ownership differ from conventional solar energy ownership?

You have likely seen solar energy deployed at industrial scale across Minnesota farmland. You might also have noted solar panels on the roofs of local schools or neighborhood houses. There are three ownership types: industrial/private, household/private, and community/public. It is industrial-scale and corporate ownership — private investors and equity firms — that dominates the solar landscape of our state.

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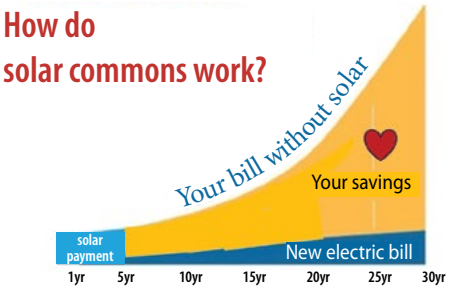
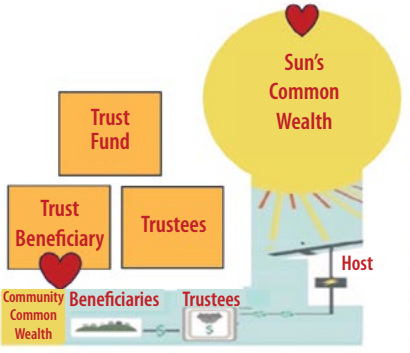


Solar savings on a typical electric bill.

Neighbors partner with a local building owner who agrees to share their free solar savings.



Neighbors use a community trust to share the solar savings.

Neighbors use a digital dashboard to transparently govern how the solar savings are used in their neighborhood.

Minnesota is unique in that it passed 2013 solar garden legislation that forces the state's largest investor-owned electric utility, Xcel Energy, to let private parties install large-scale solar farms, feed their clean electricity into Xcel's grid, and share the resulting solar savings with individual electricity users. This conventional type of solar benefit sharing is known as "community solar."

This is an important and hard-won energy democracy initiative. But it remains a mostly individual — rather than community — value, and it is proving to be vulnerable. In 2025, industry interests in the Minnesota legislature tried to cancel solar garden laws.

Solar commons offer a new way to own and share the community wealth potential of solar energy. Instead of sending financial benefits to individual households, solar commons ownership creates financial benefits for a community-based, peer-governed social wealth trust.

Our Northland Solar Commons (NSC) project is hosted by Heliene, Inc., a solar manufacturing plant on the Iron Range. Heliene CEO Martin Pochartuk has agreed to supply solar panels at cost and to pass on the solar savings (minus costs) of a 500kW solar commons array on its factory building to a social wealth trust for the 20-year period of the warranty.

The trust beneficiary is Waawaate Programs, a local nonprofit doing food sovereignty work in the neighboring Bois Forte Ojibwe community. The Bois Forte reservations are in rural northeastern Minnesota, at the end of the mainstream food distribution system. They lack access to fresh, healthy food. Colonization, the reservation system, and forced assimilation through a boarding school at Bois Forte's Lake Vermillion Reservation further disrupted how traditional foodways were passed down in households.

The 20-year food sovereignty plan that Bois Forte tribal member Dani Pieratos led is designed to rebuild an infrastructure of healthy local food provisioning — based on traditional, regenerative Ojibwe foodways. Every year of solar commoning, Waawaate Programs would receive around $60,000 from the NSC trust to do its work for the Bois Forte community.

The NSC is a community research project that Heliene, Waawaate Programs, and the University of Minnesota are co-designing and testing. We are putting together a team of software developers and artists to work on the public-facing digital dashboard that will create transparency and social trust for all solar commoning parties by tracking the array's solar production, savings, and commonwealth.

Indigenous-created public art will frame the project in an Ojibwe worldview and stand as the community's claim to its equitable portion of the sun's commonwealth.

The Prototypes

Minnesota's NSC will be the second solar commons prototyped in the U.S. The first was a small array developed in Tucson in 2018, which brought $2,500 to a historically underserved area of the city. A mural is displayed in that neighborhood's elementary schoolyard, where 26 languages are spoken. A tile game was created to teach concepts of solar commoning. School kids draw cards from the game to learn regenerative economy principles, such as: "You took a long shower this morning. Give back two water tiles."

Kids play the game before deciding, by means of a process designed by Participatory Budgeting Project, what to build in their community with their annual commonwealth distribution from the solar commons trust.

The Northland Solar Commons will have its own public art informed by an Ojibwe worldview. The art and

game will be adapted to the woodland geography and values of the Bois Forte community. The 20-year food sovereignty plan that Dani so thoughtfully created with her community members will be part of the artwork and game.

The legal agreement between Heliene and the Bois Forte community beneficiaries represents the guiding principles of solar commoning: reciprocity, mutual aid, regenerative economics, and reparative justice.

A Call to Work With Us

Imagine a thousand solar commons experiments that demonstrate, through benefit agreements and public art, what energy democracy looks like in our diverse, rural, and urban communities.

The success of the Northland Solar Commons project depends on the work of many. We are looking for software designers and artists to help us with the dashboard and public art. We need donors to help pay for the solar installation.

On the University of Minnesota's Solar Commons Project website, you can read studies of our project done by the Rocky Mountain Institute (RMI). Analysis indicates that it will deliver significantly more money to communities than it costs to build and maintain. RMI saw that we could scale community-sized solar commons throughout the U.S. over our current decade, reaching ten gigawatts and putting billions of long-term regenerative economy dollars into the hands of local communities to serve their locally determined needs. A public-facing dashboard will show the wealth built from each year's commons distribution.

We aim to see our legal agreements and open-source digital dashboard technologies made freely accessible to all solar commoning communities.

One century ago, thousands of Carnegie Libraries showed up in big cities and small towns across America. Communities agreed to follow general principles of open-stack book sharing and received donor dollars to build infrastructure. Solar commons can likewise proliferate with community support that enables sharing.

In northern Minnesota, our Northland Solar Commons project is teaching us how to repair planetary and community health. Energy sovereignty can support Indigenous food sovereignty. This was Dani's vision, as it is ours. MWP

solarcommonsproject.org, participatorybudgeting.org

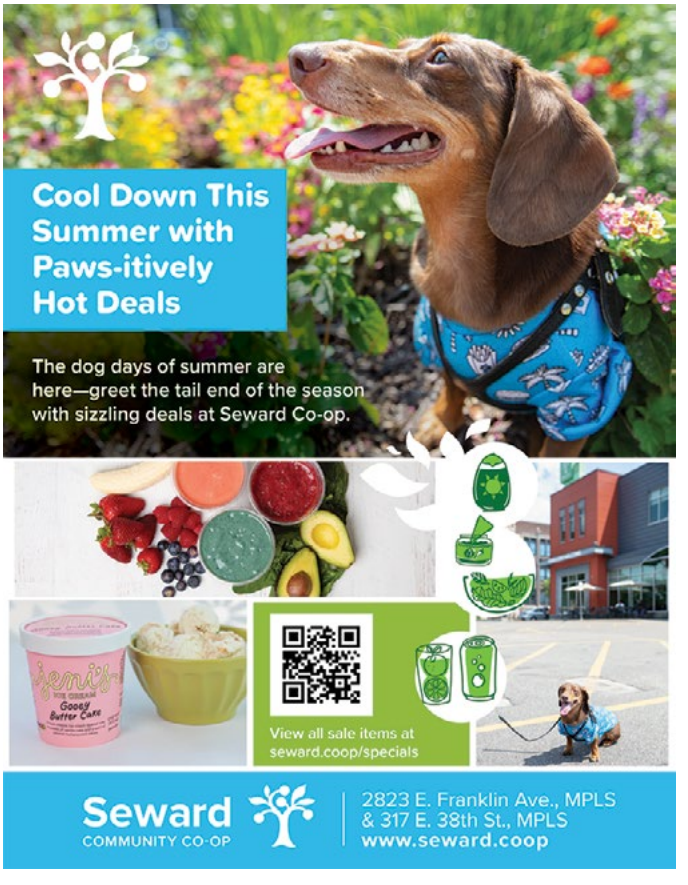


PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Voices of Energy, Land, and Justice

Margaret Cherne-Hendrick

Margaret Cherne-Hendrick
chief executive officer, Fresh Energy

Minnesotans are well known for their dedication to civic engagement and public service, especially when it comes to taking on the climate crisis. This is one of the many reasons that my wife and I knew Minnesota was the right place for us to start a family — but also the right place for me to continue building my career fighting for science-based energy policy to combat climate change.

In 2018, I joined the team at Fresh Energy — a Minnesota-based clean energy policy nonprofit that has made an outsized impact on our state's energy landscape over the past three decades. In 2025, Fresh Energy's board of directors hired me as the organization's new chief executive officer, a role I'm honored to hold. But, as most of us know, I'm stepping into this job in the midst of a climate crisis, which is exacerbated by a federal government steeped in climate denial.

When it comes to fighting the climate crisis, the changes we make by 2030 will have a monumental impact. A data-driven approach is at the heart of the work. Fresh Energy is continuing to build upon its nearly 35-year legacy by strategically advancing effective, nonpartisan, and equitable energy policy across five key climate-change areas: electricity, buildings, transportation, heavy industry, and agriculture. We know that by crafting energy policy across these five sectors, we can help prevent the worst impacts of climate change.

We are advancing climate and clean energy policies that improve public health, lower the cost of the electricity, and boost our state's economy with family-sustaining jobs. Even though the work Fresh Energy does is getting more challenging — as nonprofits working in the public interest are under attack — we are not faltering. In fact, we're doubling down.

Minnesota's climate change ecosystem is intrinsically tied to the energy that we use to power our lives. The clean energy transition — moving off fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas and onto carbon-free energy like wind and solar — is the critical lever to reduce greenhouse gases to mitigate the social, economic, and environmental impacts of climate change.

Amid the federal challenges we face, I believe that advocacy at the local level has never been more important. If Washington won't lead, then Minnesota will. We are at a time in history where states must lead.

In 2023, Fresh Energy played a role in passing Minnesota's landmark 100 percent clean electricity law, which requires that all electricity sold to Minnesota customers be carbon-free by 2040. We must keep prioritizing ambitious, equity-centered clean energy and climate work at the local, state, and regional levels. And sometimes, like this year during the Minnesota legislative session, we know that the best progress we can make is to protect and defend the progress we've already made.

Our team of scientists, economists, policy analysts, and educators are working to eliminate emissions economy-wide while also making sure the energy transition does not leave anyone behind. The importance of strong state-based energy policy is more clear than ever. Fresh Energy is building coalitions among Minnesotans and tradespeople, creating policies that lay the groundwork for a clean steel industry, using data to modernize how Minnesotans think of natural gas policies, and beyond.

With the ongoing rollbacks and roadblocks to climate progress, I know it can be hard to stay positive and have hope in the future. But the momentum for fighting climate change can't be stopped. This gives me hope.

Louise Miltich
executive vice president, Great Plains Institute

On a dark February evening, surrounded by folding chairs in a gym in western Lincoln County, I shook hands with a local farmer who had an armful of maps and papers. His trip through subzero weather to see me was not to talk about the harvest; the research he brought wasn't about crops. He came because he saw a problem — and a solution.

He made an arc with his hand across an imaginary sky and flexed all five fingers to mimic blinking lights. "The sky shouldn't flash like this; it doesn't need to."

That conversation stayed with me. This local farmer had seen the blinking lights transform the night sky as wind development grew across southwestern Minnesota — a transformation altering the elemental character of his home and community. But even though it would have been easy to arrive angry, he brought more to the table. He understood the tradeoffs wind development presented, and he had researched safety lighting used in the Dakotas that could reduce visual impacts. He brought curiosity, not

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Margaret Cherne-Hendrick

complaint, to a conversation with a state regulator from the Twin Cities.

In Greater Minnesota, energy infrastructure decisions aren't abstract — they're personal, immediate, and woven into the fabric of land, the resources, and even the sky overhead. Getting these decisions right is central to whether we achieve a just, net-zero carbon future.

Minnesota is at a turning point in how we reduce carbon emissions and expand clean energy. Big goals are in place, from our state's carbon-free electricity standard to ambitious public and private investments in energy and climate action. But meeting these goals requires more than new technology or policy on paper.

Most of the infrastructure that will power our net-zero future — wind and solar farms, transmission lines, carbon pipelines — will be built in Greater Minnesota. If we don't get the siting and engagement right, we risk deepening divides rather than building the shared future we need.

Too often, rural communities, Tribal nations, and local governments are brought into the conversation late, after plans are drawn. When this happens, people feel decisions are made for them, not with them. The result? Delays, lawsuits, and broken trust that could have been avoided with true early engagement.

These communities bear the physical footprint of clean energy projects. They deserve a fair share of the benefits: resilience during extreme weather, healthier environments, lower energy costs, and local jobs. Rural equity isn't an afterthought — it's at the heart of climate justice.

When we talk about energy, we're talking about daily life: keeping the lights on, running businesses, breathing clean air, drinking clean water. Clean energy infrastructure decisions shape all of this — and the impacts aren't felt equally.

That's why leaders who prioritize understanding how

continued on next page

people live and what they value, before asking for their partnership in the energy transition, are important. With that foundation, we can co-create better solutions.

One of those leaders is Mary Otto at the Minnesota Department of Transportation. She started as a Tribal liaison at the Department of Commerce and now runs MnDOT's Tribal-State Relations Training — a program I had all my staff complete when I oversaw the state's energy environmental review unit. Understanding the history and culture of the land is essential to energy siting.

Mary's background in education made her a natural translator. She helped me explain technical and bureaucratic processes in clear and respectful ways. She believed, as I do, that relationships must come before projects.

We partnered on early outreach for several siting efforts, including the Big Bend Wind project in southwest Minnesota. State regulators there faced the challenge of balancing wind development with protecting the Jeffers Petroglyphs — a site of deep cultural significance. Thanks to Mary's help, a solution was forged that protected sacred ground and advanced the state's climate goals.

Mary's leadership reminds us that progress isn't just technical, it is relational. That's why I was excited to join the Great Plains Institute, whose work has been shaped by this approach for nearly 30 years. We help communities lead energy decisions that reflect not just what we build, but how we build it — and who benefits.

When rural communities, Tribes, and small towns shape energy solutions, they don't just protect their interests. They strengthen Minnesota's path to net zero for everyone.

This work isn't easy. It requires courage: the courage to listen first, to sit with competing priorities, to resist easy answers. It means building relationships that last longer than one project or permit. If we care about justice — if we care about creating a clean energy future that works for all Minnesotans — we have no other choice.

The good news? Across our state, communities are already leading. They're balancing land use, community needs, and climate goals every day. And they're showing us that the clean energy transition can be not just faster, but fairer — if we choose to build it that way, together.

Sarah Mooradian
government relations and policy director, CURE

Each year, there are more reports of record-breaking temperatures, droughts, and storms wreaking havoc on our communities, economies, and ecosystems. We know these are the consequences of human-driven climate change and that there is an urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to mitigate these impacts. In Minnesota, electricity generation accounts for about 20 percent of the

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Margaret Cherne-Hendrick

state's net GHG emissions. That's why, in recent years, Minnesota has passed laws aimed at driving down GHGs from energy production. The 100 percent carbon-free standard passed in 2023 is the most recent example.

For more than 30 years, CURE has been one of the few grassroots organizations located outside the metro area, working at the intersection of climate, energy, and environmental harms from a uniquely rural viewpoint. At the core of our work is the belief that a clean energy future is one rooted in rural communities. Without the help of and investment in our rural communities and the people who live, work, and worship in them, we cannot achieve an equitable energy transition. Energy democracy guides everything we do at CURE.

Minnesota's rural communities have a long history with energy democracy. Through the 1920s, almost all farms and rural communities lacked access to electricity. But over the next few decades, these same rural communities paved the way for a paradigm shift in energy systems by establishing rural electric cooperatives.

Rural electric cooperatives are democratically owned institutions that generate and distribute electricity to member-owners. In fact, Minnesota was home to one of the first rural electric cooperatives in the nation: Stony Run Light and Power Company, down the road from CURE's office in Montevideo.

Today we find ourselves at another crossroads, with an urgent need to shift to new forms of energy generation, transmission, and distribution in a way that incorporates all voices. Rural communities — and rural electric cooperatives in particular — can and should lead the way in this transition. Rural people must be treated as an integral part of the decision-making process, from pre-project planning and design through permitting, construction, and operation. People must be able to take ownership of the kinds of energy infrastructure sited in

their communities and determine what benefits they want to receive for hosting these projects.

Those of us who live in urban and suburban places cannot expect rural people to shoulder the burden of hosting energy infrastructure while shutting them out of the discussion and providing no protections or benefits in return.

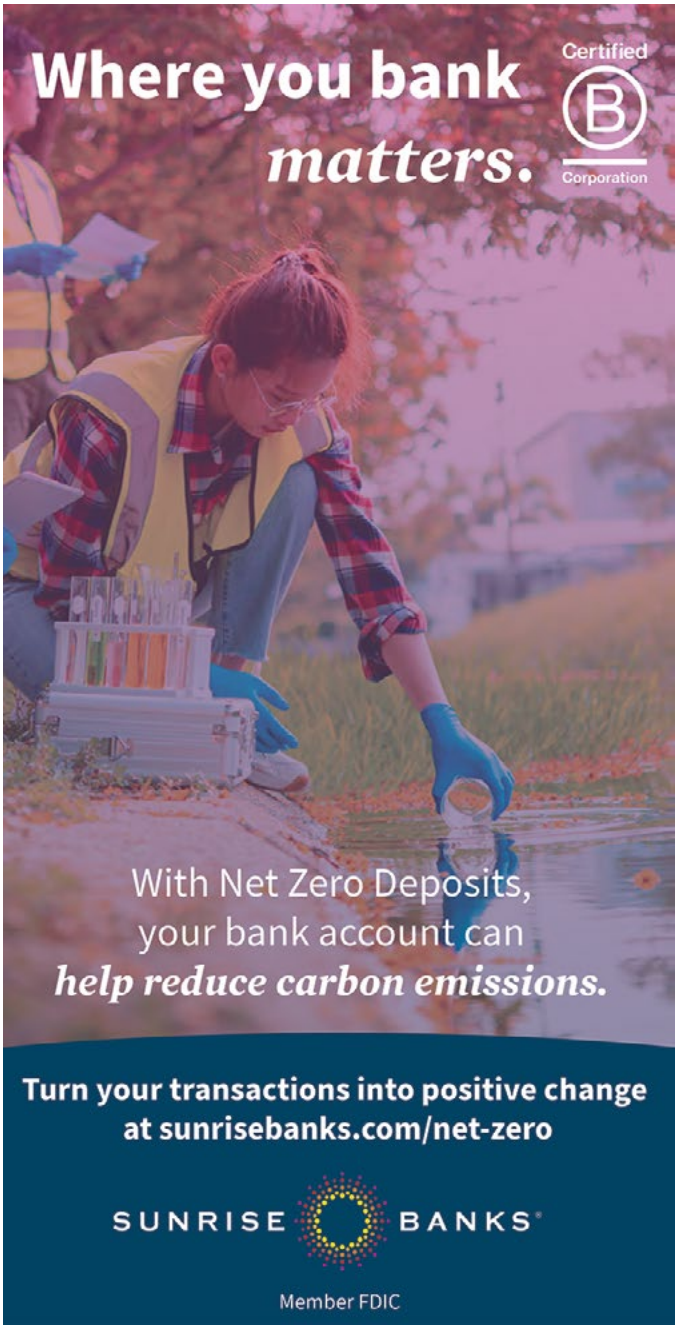
For CURE, supporting this rural energy future involves educating the public on the basics of our energy system, renewable energy technologies, siting of clean energy projects, when and how to get engaged in proceedings before the Public Utilities Commission, and why it matters. There's a lot of bad information, and we want to be a trusted resource for rural communities about energy issues.

Another essential part of our work is to inform those who get their electricity from a rural electric cooperative about their rights and responsibilities as member-owners. Given the unique structure of cooperatives, member-owners (customers) have a unique ability to influence what their cooperatives do. This includes voting in annual board elections, attending board meetings, or running for a seat on the board.

Like their urban and suburban counterparts, the people living in Greater Minnesota know the importance of a reliable electric grid, want cheaper electric bills, and want a brighter, healthier future for themselves and future generations. But understandably, rural people don't want to be told that they must bear the burden of hosting energy infrastructure by those who have no connection to their communities.

We owe it to our rural neighbors to ensure that their voices and visions are sought, respected, and heeded. That is the only way to achieve a truly equitable energy transition. MWP

Details: fresh-energy.org, betterenergy.org, curemn.org



Healing the Wounds of History: The Saint Paul Reparations Commission

PHOTO SARAH WHITING

submitted by Carla Robinson

Pilgrim Baptist Church has been Carla Robinson's family church for over 50 years. It is the oldest African American church in Minnesota, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and was founded by a group of formerly enslaved people from Missouri, led by Robert T. Hickman.

The legacy of 246 years of enslavement, 100 years of Jim Crow and segregation, and subsequent decades of systemic racism has left a profound mark on American Descendants of Chattel Slavery (ADOCS), creating a racial wealth gap that persists across the country.

After George Floyd's murder in 2020, the movement for racial justice was re-ignited in Minnesota and beyond. Recognizing its role in systemic racism, the Saint Paul City Council issued a formal apology in 2021, acknowledging past injustices and laying the groundwork for reparative action. This apology set the stage two years later for the creation of the Saint Paul Recovery Act Community Reparations Commission.

Currently, the commission serves as an advisory body to the Saint Paul mayor and city council. Its mission is to repair damage caused by public and private systemic racism in the city, which resulted in racial disparities in generational wealth, homeownership, health care, education, employment, and pay, as well as within the criminal justice system.

There have long been discussions about reparations in the African American community, most notably the unfulfilled promise of 40 acres and a mule for formerly enslaved people after emancipation. There has never been a doubt in my mind that my community is owed a debt in this country. America was built on the free labor of enslaved people, while justice, equality, and the promise of the American dream have been deliberately withheld from those individuals and their descendants. The trauma and harm caused by the oppression of our ancestors have been passed down across generations, resulting in health disparities, economic hardship, and social inequities.

The opportunity to contribute to my community's healing process through reparations — to help rebuild and restore what was taken — made me eager to apply to serve on the commission. I am honored to be part of this transformative effort as a commission member. The commission advises the mayor and city council on repairing the harm caused by systemic racism in Saint Paul, offering both short- and long-

term recommendations. We hold monthly public meetings and subcommittee sessions as needed. I was appointed to a two-year term.

The commission's work is more than policy; it is an opportunity to create a foundation of equity, healing, and empowerment for ADOCS who are residents of Saint Paul. If implemented successfully, this initiative will set a national precedent for reparative justice, demonstrating how cities can take meaningful steps toward reconciliation for past harms.

Because of this work, we were recognized in 2024 by the Economic Policy Initiative as one of the top five states in reparations task forces and truth-telling commissions.

Our work aligns with the United Nations' five tenets of reparations:

- Repair: to restore communities harmed by systemic racism
- Restitution: to return what was unjustly taken
- Compensation: to address economic losses
- Rehabilitation: to provide care and resources for affected individuals
- Guarantees of Non-Repetition: ensuring that structural inequities are dismantled

While compensation is often the most recognized aspect of reparations, true healing requires all five pillars. Restoring wealth and well-being to Saint Paul's ADOCS community is not just about financial restitution — it is about repairing the wounds of history and ensuring lasting change. MWP

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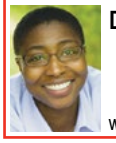
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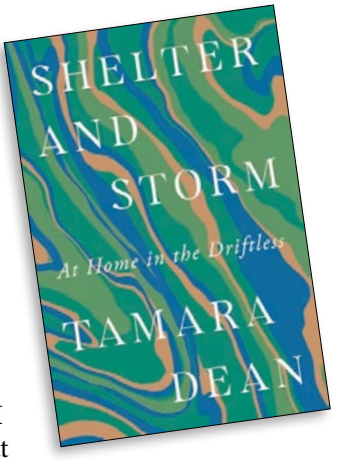
Living Lightly on the Land

reported by Olivia Worcester



Essayist Tamara Dean and her partner David sought a way to live lightly on the planet, and her quest drew her to an unusual landscape: the Driftless Area of Wisconsin. In this memoir of building a sustainable lifestyle, she explores personal experiences with science and history to illuminate a thoughtful way forward for anyone concerned about climate change.

"The first and last essays act as a natural frame for our experience, because the first essay, 'So Near the Soil,' sets out our intentions and how I was naive. I learned that we wouldn't be able to accomplish all that we were striving to do," says Dean in a conversation with Minnesota Women's Press. "The last essay, 'Slow Blues,' describes the reasons we would eventually leave."

Dean shares a phrase from environmental writer Kathleen Jamie about early stories written by men — "the lone enraptured male." When they wrote about their experiences in the wild, she says, they "eliminated their wives or partners who were with them the whole time, and erased other people from their narratives, so that they could be that independent guy inviting nature to give them that transcendent experience. In my work, I feel very strongly about including the other people around me — creating a community of people who are adding to the collective wisdom about a place."

Dean does not live in the area anymore, and she misses the beauty of the landscape. "Looking out the windows, we would see remarkable things, like watching raccoons swing like monkeys through the top of an oak tree just scarfing down acorns all morning. I learned so much about nature, being so close to it there. I miss that the most, but I also miss the community."

Excerpt from *Shelter and Storm: At Home in the Driftless*, by Tamara Dean (University of Minnesota Press, 2025)

When David and I conceived of building our own house of mud bricks, we shared [Woody] Guthrie's distrust of government and a desire to live on our own terms. We were reading books on peak oil, climate change, alternative building, and renewable energy. We had earnest, romantic notions of sustainable *something*, responsible *something*, homemade or homegrown *something*. Like Guthrie's protagonists, we lusted for a home made by us and for us and sought stability in the face of uncertain economic and environmental climates. Accompanying our intentions was a what-the-hell spirit. We wanted to undertake something extraordinary together. We recognized our naivete (the fact of it, if not its depth), but we were determined — stiff-necked and disinclined to bow down.

Find the longer Q&A with Tamara Dean online

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